

Flagstaff Park  
Cambridge  
Middlesex County  
Massachusetts

HABS No. MA-999

HABS  
MASS  
9-CAMB,  
34-

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. MA-999

## FLAGSTAFF PARK

Location: Adjacent to Cambridge Common and Harvard Yard, bordered by Massachusetts Avenue and Kirkland Street, Cambridge, Middlesex County, Massachusetts.

USGS Boston North Quadrangle Universal Transverse  
Mercator Coordinates: 19.325460.4693450.

Present Owner: City of Cambridge

Present Use: Park; re-landscaped due to new subway construction (1979).

Significance: Flagstaff Park, originally part of the Cambridge Common, was landscaped at the time of subway construction in 1909-1913. It contains a flagstaff base designed by prominent architects Peabody and Stearns, and a statue of Charles Sumner by Anne Whitney, one of the first successful female American sculptors. The park is central to the traffic pattern of Harvard Square, and introduced an element of Beaux-Arts formalism into the common area.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. History of the Park:

Flagstaff Park is a portion of Cambridge Common, which was originally established in 1630. The Common was enclosed and improved as a park by the Massachusetts Legislature in 1830. The park was originally one of three triangular sections of the Common located to the east of Massachusetts Avenue (see Walling map of 1854). These have been traversed by various highways since the settlement of Cambridge, but were never built upon. A view taken from the tower of Memorial Hall in 1875 shows them enclosed with post-and-rail fences and planted with elm trees. This configuration was maintained with minor changes until subway construction began in 1909.

The plans for Flagstaff Park, prepared by the Boston Elevated Railway, were reviewed and accepted by the Cambridge Board of Park Commissioners in 1910. The design revised the street layout and bisected the park with six foot high brick walls for the streetcar ramp. A twelve foot wall was erected across the south end of the park; a section of this forms the tunnel entrance.



Behind the tunnel portal wall is a small paved plaza containing a statue of Charles Sumner on a limestone pedestal. The statue was designed by Anne Whitney, and is signed and dated 1900. Whitney originally submitted the design to a competition for a statue of Sumner to be erected in the Boston Public Garden in 1876. Her model was chosen as one of the best three out of twenty-six entries. When it was revealed that Whitney was the sculptor there was much consternation over the fact that a woman had placed in the competition. Whitney was awarded \$500, as was Martin Milmore, and Thomas Ball received the commission. In 1900, Whitney produced the full size statue, which was cast by Mosman, a founder in Chicopee, Massachusetts. With the support of several Harvard professors the statue was placed at the delta at Kirkland Street and Cambridge street in 1902. Completion of the Sumner statue was Whitney's last major undertaking before her death in 1915 at the age of 93. The statue was made the centerpiece of the plaza at Flagstaff park soon after the completion of subway construction.

The flagpole, which gave the park its new name, was designed by prominent Boston Architects Peabody and Stearns, and was commissioned by the Daughters of the American Revolution. It was erected within the new park in 1913 after construction was completed.

The design of Flagstaff Park introduced an element of Beaux Arts formalism into the rural atmosphere of Cambridge Common. The designers used the walls to enclose the previously open vistas from the east and south, and in so doing altered the traditional perspectives north from Harvard Square and east from the Common. Richardson's Austin Hall had been sited to terminate the view from Harvard Square, while Memorial Hall and the Harvard buildings around the delta between Kirkland and Cambridge Streets were visually extensions of the Common. These vistas were obscured by the intrusion of the ramp walls and portal. Except for paving to accommodate a parking lot between the bus ramp and Massachusetts Avenue, Flagstaff Park remained essentially unchanged until the beginning of new subway construction in 1979.

B. Sources of Information:

1. Old Views:

View of Harvard Yard from the northeast, ca. 1865,  
photographer unknown, Cambridge Historical Commission  
Collection.

View of Cambridge Common from the east, taken from the tower of Memorial Hall, 1875, photographer unknown, Cambridge Historical Commission Collection.

View of Flagstaff Park from the southwest, taken between 1942 and 1950. Cambridge Planning Board Photo, Cambridge Historical Commission collection.

2. Bibliography:

a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Conversation with Michael Richman, Editor, Daniel Chester French Papers, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Washington, D. C. November 15, 1979.

b. Secondary and published sources:

Craven, Wayne, Sculpture in America. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1968, pp. 228-323, 226.

Hitchcock, Henry-Russell, The Architecture of H. H. Richardson and His Times. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press 1966 (first edition: 1936), p. 160.

Rogers, Elizabeth Payne, "Anne Whitney, Sculptor", Art Quarterly, Autumn 1962, Vol. 25, pp. 244-61.

4. Likely sources not yet investigated:

Harvard Archives  
Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Anne Whitney Papers, Wellesly College Library,  
Wellesley, Massachusetts.

Prepared by Charles Sullivan  
Cambridge Historical  
Commission  
July 2, 1979  
and  
Emily J. Harris  
Historic American Buildings  
Survey  
November 1979

PART II. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records are the result of a project undertaken by the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) and the Urban Mass Transportation Administration (UMTA) in compliance with Executive Order 11593 as a mitigative effort in the Red Line Extension from Harvard Square to Alewife. John A. Burns, AIA, was the HABS project coordinator. The historical information was prepared by Charles Sullivan of the Cambridge Historical Commission. Ten of the photographs were taken on April 26, 1979 by Leslie Vant of Vant's Photo Service in Reading Massachusetts. The remaining six photographs were reproduced from negatives taken by Gary P. Balboni for the Perini Construction Company in March 1979. The records were edited and expanded by Emily J. Harris, an architectural historian in the HABS office in November 1979.